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Intercept**

THE WAR PARTY

From Bush to Obama, and Trump to Biden, U.S.
Militarism Is the Great Unifier

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Many Democrats, liberals, traditional conservatives, and even some leftists continue to tell themselves that the election of Joe Biden was the first step toward restoring U.S. standing in the world after the damage caused by Donald Trump. And in a variety of ways — many stylistic and some substantive — that perspective has merit. But when it comes to national security policy, the U.S. has been on a steady, hypermilitarized arc for decades. Taken broadly, U.S. policy has been largely consistent on “national security” and “coun-

terterrorism” matters from 9/11 to the present.

The ascent of the charlatan businessman Trump to the presidency in 2016 was a logical – if somewhat on-the-nose – plot twist in the U.S. imperial saga that managed to distill many truths about this nation into a four-year televised and live-tweeted debacle.

The continued media drumbeat that Trump remains the gravest enduring threat to U.S. democracy is fueled by legitimate concerns over Trump’s frantic efforts to use the office of the presidency to overturn the election results, which came to a head with the violent demonstrations at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. These dangerous actions, taken in concert with [ongoing](#) Republican [efforts](#) at [voter disenfranchisement](#) and the peddling of false conspiracy theories, merit serious concern. The Trumpist movement, especially its members in Congress, poses a clear threat to the democratic process. But even in the face of this threat, the bipartisan imperial consensus was so strong that the Democrats continued to increase Trump’s national security powers throughout his presidency.

This reflexive bipartisan militarism stands in stark opposition to the Democratic Party’s sweeping and fallacious rhetoric that the bad face of the U.S. emerges only when Republicans seize executive power – and that the sole remedy is electing Democrats. Civilian victims of Barack Obama’s

The bipartisan imperial consensus was so strong that the Democrats continued to increase Trump’s national security powers throughout his presidency.

[drone strikes](#) might have another view. Before Trump, according to Democratic doctrine, the evils of U.S. policy originated with George W. Bush and his “co-president” Dick Cheney. Yet under both Trump and Bush, the rhetoric from many Democrats was pathologically disconnected from their support for ever-expanding militarist and surveillance policies.

The Democratic party, in its self-tailored version of history, has always been a steadfast force of resistance against GOP excesses and abuses. The Democrats appear to see no contradiction between fighting Republican attacks on voting rights and their own enthusiastic embrace of empire in foreign policy. Without support from the leadership of the Democratic Party – and votes from rank-and-file congressional Democrats – many of the worst national security policies of the past two decades would have been impossible to implement or would have required enormous political battles or an even greater, and abusive, use of executive power to accomplish.

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If the Democratic Party offered a true resistance to the GOP, the history of the post-9/11 world would be very different. Instead of California Democrat Rep. Barbara Lee standing as the lone vote in the entire Congress against the Authorization for the Use of Military Force – the “blank check” for global war – days after September 11, 2001, we would have seen the majority of Democrats join her in a chorus of opposition and restraint. Sen. Russ Feingold, Democrat from Wisconsin, would not have been the only senator to vote against the Patriot Act. The legislative authorities for the

Iraq War would have been thwarted without the support of a majority of Democratic senators: 29 [voted](#) in its favor, including the current president. Without that backing, the Bush-Cheney administration would have had to openly and publicly own its maniacal belief that when it comes to “national security” policy, the executive branch can and should function as a de facto dictatorship.

While a vocal minority of Democrats spent much of the two terms of the Bush administration fighting against the Iraq War and the grave human rights abuses being committed by the CIA and military, the leadership of the party consistently abetted the Bush-Cheney agenda. When it mattered most, the party failed to offer more than meager protests. After the Democrats gained a House majority in the 2006 midterm elections, incoming House Speaker Nancy Pelosi made clear there would be no accountability at the highest levels of power. “I have said it before and I will say it again: Impeachment is off the table,” Pelosi [asserted](#). “We pledge partnerships with Congress and the Republicans in Congress, and the president – not partisanship.”



The 9/11 Wars

There is an understandable tendency to view the past 20 years of U.S. militarism as a defining era unto itself. And, in some crucial ways, the full spectrum of U.S. responses to the September 11 attacks did alter the world and, with it, the U.S. way of war. But at their core, the most consequential actions emanating from

Washington, D.C., after 9/11 were already in motion. The Bush administration came to power with an eye toward regime change in Iraq. But it did so emboldened by the bipartisan [vote](#) during Bill Clinton's tenure that made regime change official U.S. policy, backed up by [constant bombings](#) of Iraq throughout Clinton's two terms. Even Bernie Sanders, then a House representative, [supported](#) that bill, which was largely the [work](#) of the neoconservative Project for a New American Century. Under Clinton, the U.S. was already moving toward a system of remote [lethal strikes](#) and small wars, though it was much more reliant on legacy systems like [cruise missiles](#) rather than the now ubiquitous armed drones. The [precursor](#) of the Patriot Act was passed with significant support from both parties, with Biden serving as one of its lead architects, a fact he regularly and proudly [cited](#). The U.S. was already operating a well-oiled economic warfare machine with its use of crippling sanctions in an effort to overthrow governments or punish populations into submission.

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In its malignant genius, the Bush-Cheney administration — stacked with [career hawks](#) who knew how to work the levers of power — saw opportunity in the rubble of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. They saw the value of tapping into the rage, shock, and, most importantly, fear that gripped the nation in the

aftermath of the terror attacks to [accelerate the implementation of their agenda](#). The Democratic Party willingly folded itself into the Bush administration's aspirations and bestowed upon it sweeping war and surveillance powers. The most significant milestones of the past two decades lie not with the victories of extroverted villainous Republicans like Bush or Trump, but in the synergy that exists among the various political factions between U.S. elections.



Yemeni children look at graffiti protesting U.S. drone strikes on Sept. 19, 2018, in Sanaa, Yemen. Photo: Mohammed Hamoud/Getty Images

Targeted Killings

When Barack Obama won the presidency in 2008, the party had an opportunity to showcase what an antidote to Bush-Cheney policy-making would look like. This prospect was a major part of the suc-

cess of the Obama campaigns against both Hillary Clinton, an Iraq War supporter, and John McCain, a notorious militarist. Instead, Obama expanded some of the most dangerous aspects of the Bush-Cheney war apparatus while shielding the CIA, military leaders, and the entire Bush administration from any accountability. Obama surged troops in Afghanistan and empowered both the CIA and Joint Special Operations Command to engage in expanded global “targeted killing” operations. He embraced the widespread use of covert operations, ratcheted up drone strikes in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, initiated air wars in Somalia and Yemen that endure to this day, and waged a disastrous regime change war in Libya.

Obama used his credibility among the base of the Democratic Party in an effort to [normalize](#) assassination as an acceptable, if not [preferable](#), tool of U.S. policy. Obama relied so heavily on drone strikes that they became a policy unto themselves, and he [publicly](#) asserted the [right](#) of the U.S. president to assassinate American citizens by means of “targeted killing,” based on the [vague notion](#) that they might someday threaten national security or even U.S. interests. While the U.S. government has long engaged in covert assassinations, Obama transformed and legitimized such operations with his intricate attempts to rebrand the practice and to publicly argue in favor of its legality and morality.

Obama’s Justice Department [defended](#) former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and others against [charges](#) of war crimes in civil litigation and [refused](#) to hold the CIA accountable for its widespread use of torture and extraordinary rendition. Obama simultaneously prosecuted whistleblowers with a vengeance using a warped interpretation of the 1917 Espionage Act. His CIA director, John Brennan, [lied](#) about the agency spying on U.S. Senate torture

investigators, and his director of national intelligence, James Clapper, **lied** under oath when **testifying** about mass surveillance and the bulk collection of communications among U.S. citizens.

By the time Obama prepared to leave office, his administration had built up what amounted to a secret parallel judicial system to enforce the long-standing U.S. global killing regime. During Obama's second term, his administration cobbled together a ramshackle set of **guidelines** for targeted killings that he said he hoped would bring legal structure, oversight, and transparency to his signature military tactic. But these guidelines had no teeth that the next commander in chief could not easily knock out. In selling his targeted killing policy, Obama repeatedly banked on the **notion** that he could be *personally* trusted to make these decisions in secret. That mentality led to a total absence of meaningful checks, by the time the 2016 election was decided, against a dangerous and now institutionalized claim of sweeping and lethal presidential powers.





President Donald Trump speaks to the troops during a surprise Thanksgiving Day visit at Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan on Nov. 28, 2019. Photo: Olivier Douliery/AFP via Getty Images

War Powers

Donald Trump's defeat of Hillary Clinton sent shockwaves through the national security state and the Washington, D.C., political establishment. On war policy, Trump was difficult to assess before assuming office because his messaging and pronouncements were often contradicted by other statements or moves he made. As a candidate, and as president, Trump would stake out Ron Paul-esque libertarian [opposition](#) to U.S. [wars](#) and militarism, and in the next speech – and sometimes next breath – he would engage in a grotesque soliloquy about taking a nation's oil, murdering [families](#) of terror suspects, or [wiping](#) countries off the map. Rhetoric can itself be dangerous when it is emanating from the mouth of a man who controls nuclear weapons and vast military forces, so it was always reasonable to be deeply [concerned](#) over the temperamental ravings of the 45th president. Yet in the end, most of his rants fizzled into bluster. This was in part a byproduct of the competing factions within the administration pushing contradictory agendas, including on war policy and the response to the 2020 election results.



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In matters of war, the truth is that there were not many substantive national security anomalies brought about by Trump's control of the White House. Trump was far more belligerent than Jimmy Carter, but he was not even in the same league as Bush and Cheney when it came to global mass killing. While steering clear of the sustained large-scale ground operations that marked both Bush presidencies in Iraq, Trump and Obama showed great willingness to use U.S. military and CIA force, particularly in undeclared war zones, and ran operations that consistently killed large numbers of civilians. Obama initiated new military action in more countries than Trump.

Stylistically, of course, there were many differences between Trump and former U.S. presidents, and his rhetoric was often terrifying and appalling. But in national security policy, Trump generally operated within the norms of the modern U.S. presidency and received mainstream praise for it. How

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could anyone forget the moments early in his tenure when establishment media pundits declared that Trump "became president" after he [unleashed](#) missiles on Syria or after he [spoke](#) during the State of the Union of a U.S. soldier killed in a deadly and unnecessary ground operation that he had authorized in Yemen?

Trump swiftly [undid](#) many of the modest rules implemented during

Obama's second term aimed at reducing civilian deaths in U.S. drone and other airstrikes and gave greater latitude to field commanders and mid-level officials to authorize such strikes. Trump dispensed with Obama's "superfluous" policies for acknowledging deaths caused by CIA actions and lowered the threshold for killing unknown people, particularly "military aged males."

"Trump easily did away with virtually all the policy constraints and scholarly debates. His rules glance at law, and lay bare how easily a president thinks it may be set aside in service of vague 'national security interests.' It's hard not to see these rules as a license to kill," argued Hina Shamsi, head of the American Civil Liberties Union's national security project. "The Trump rules served as open-ended authorization for the United States to kill virtually anyone it designates as a terrorist threat, anywhere in the world, without reference to the laws prohibiting extrajudicial killing under human rights law. The Trump rules may seem more extreme but in core ways they merely continue an unlawful U.S. extrajudicial killing program."

While using the military to continue pummeling Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, Trump expanded the U.S. drone war ratcheted up by Obama in Somalia. By the end of Trump's presidency, the civilian death toll from U.S. drone strikes, mostly during Obama and Trump years, was astonishing. A report from U.K.-based watchdog group Airwars found that "at least 22,679, and potentially as many as 48,308 civilians, have been likely killed by US strikes" since 9/11.

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Drone Wars



Yemen policy under Trump was in step with decades of U.S. support for the brutal dictatorship of Saudi Arabia, and he did his absolute best to top the [Bush family](#) in [cozying up](#) to the royals. Once Trump took power, a narrative emerged that pretended it was Trump, not Obama, who started the U.S.-fueled horror show in Yemen. While he certainly escalated U.S. support for Saudi Arabia's murderous campaign, it was the Obama administration that [began](#) a secret and [sustained](#) U.S. bombing campaign in Yemen in 2009 and gave the Saudis the official green light for aerial bombardment of Yemen in 2015 with the [aid](#) of U.S. [weapons](#). In September 2016, at the end of his presidency, Obama [approved](#) a \$115 billion arms sale to the Saudis, which at the time was "the most of any U.S. administration in the 71-year U.S.-Saudi alliance." Under pressure from human rights activists and some members of Congress, Obama [excluded](#) the sale of certain precision-guided munitions, citing the worsening situation in Yemen. Trump reversed Obama's exclusion and included the weapons as part of his own "tremendous" [arms deal](#) with the Saudis announced in May 2017. Absent the brutal murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi agents in Turkey in 2018, it is not certain that the effort to confront U.S. support for Saudi Arabia's genocidal war in Yemen would have gained its [unprecedented](#) momentum. Trump's grotesque embrace of the Saudi dictatorship, particularly his [defense](#) of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman after the murder, was also a decisive factor in gaining some Republican [support](#) for cutting off weapons shipments. Trump [vetoed](#) the legislation.

Trump's appointment of neoconservatives to his war cabinet, chief among them John Bolton and Mike Pompeo, at times resulted in a strange mixture of Cheney-style policymaking that undermined Trump's more dominant rhetorical projection of a right-wing libertarian foreign policy outlook. Among Trump's most dangerous military acts as president was the [assassination](#) of Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani in Baghdad. That strike risked starting a full-blown war with Iran. While many Democrats expressed strong [opposition](#) to the strike, there is and has long been a powerful chorus of voices within the party that actually [believes](#) more military confrontation of Iran is warranted, so it is hardly a given that Democrats would have stopped Trump from moving forward. Some top Democrats, while criticizing Trump for keeping the operation secret from congressional leaders and offering other procedural objections, celebrated the assassination. Then-Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., [said](#) Suleimani was a "notorious terrorist" and that "no one should shed a tear over his death."

For four years, the most prominent figures in the Democratic Party, along with most of its congressional foot soldiers, told us that Trump was a Russian stooge and the most dangerous president in history – all while simultaneously lavishing his administration with sweeping surveillance powers and record-shattering military budgets. In 2019, months before the Suleimani strike, Rep. Ro Khanna, a Democrat from California, offered an [amendment](#) to the National Defense Authorization Act that would have prohibited such actions, but it was removed from the final bill. "Any member who voted for the NDAA – a blank check – can't now express dismay that Trump may have launched another war in the Middle East," Khanna [wrote](#) on Twitter after Suleimani's assassination. "My Amendment, which was stripped, would have cut off \$\$ for any of-

fensive attack against Iran including against officials like Soleimani.”

The NDAA [passed](#) with overwhelming Democratic support. We saw the same pattern when Democrats sided with their Republican colleagues in [extending](#) the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, one of the key state organs of domestic spy operations. In 2020, at the peak of Trump’s insanity, 10 Democrats [blocked](#) an effort by Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., to stop the FBI’s warrantless surveillance of web browser history. Some leading Democrats [joined](#) with neo-conservative Republicans in the waning days of Trump’s presidency in an effort to impede him from ending the war in Afghanistan.

It would be a mistake to view these congressional actions as hypocrisy. They should be seen, rather, as key indicators of the core agenda of the Democratic Party leadership on matters of militarism and “national security.” Even with a president in power whom its members constantly portrayed as an unstable authoritarian, the Democratic Party refused to close the spigot on the commander in chief’s vast powers.





President Joe Biden addresses the 76th Session of the U.N. General Assembly at the U.N. headquarters in New York City on Sept. 21, 2021. Photo: Eduardo Munoz/Getty Images

A More Decorous Empire

On war policy, Joe Biden was never the grandfatherly career politician who would heal the nation after Trump and move us to a new era of peace. For the national security establishment in D.C., Biden represented the only viable candidate to stop Bernie Sanders in the primary and to bring decorum back to imperialism by unseating Trump. Unlike Trump, Biden is a [lifelong creature](#) of Washington and one of the most consequential politicians in the shaping of modern U.S. foreign and national security policy. Biden was an essential player in the premiere foreign policy debacle of modern U.S. history: the invasion of Iraq. He was a strong supporter of the invasion of Afghanistan, claimed credit for authoring large parts of the Patriot Act, and was one of the most passionate defenders of Israeli aggression and war crimes in Congress. As Obama's vice president, he helped shape the U.S. military posture as a global, high-tech octopus whose tentacles can strike anywhere at any time in the name of national security.

In September, Biden delivered his first address as president before the United Nations General Assembly. "I stand here today, for the first time in 20 years, with the United States not at war," Biden [said](#). "We've turned the page." It was an astonishing, brazen statement. While Biden did withdraw from Afghanistan, he has made

clear that the U.S. will continue to use drone strikes and other methods to wage war in the country. By the time he appeared on the dais at U.N. headquarters, Biden had already authorized [bombings](#) in Syria and Iraq and drone strikes in Somalia and Afghanistan. Embedded within Biden's false "turned the page" claim was a recurring theme of American Exceptionalism: the U.S. government's characterizations of its own actions need not be based in reality or supported by facts.

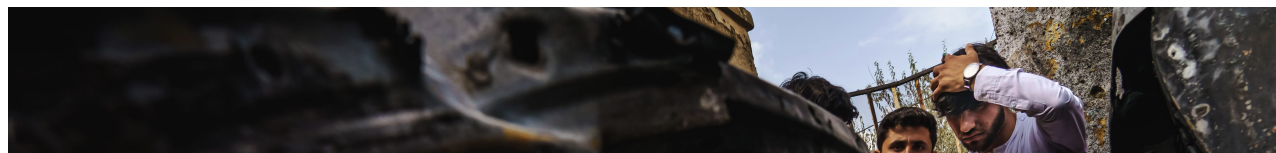
Biden deserves credit for moving forward, in the face of some powerful opposition, with the withdrawal from Afghanistan. But the plan he implemented was primarily developed by the Trump administration. Biden has indicated that he would have approached the withdrawal differently, but ultimately justified proceeding under the terms of the Doha agreement with the Taliban by stating that the U.S. needed to respect its international agreements. "It is perhaps not what I would have negotiated myself, but it was an agreement made by the United States government, and that means something," Biden [said](#) in April when he announced the withdrawal.

Biden was in a tough spot. If he did not move forward at that moment, the U.S. presence would likely have dragged on indefinitely, despite his pledges. Instead, he knowingly subjected himself to cheap shots, mostly from Republican political figures and the conservative media who seized on the chaos to blame him for implementing Trump's policy. More significantly, Biden forcefully rejected [pressure](#) from [military brass](#), two [prominent](#) former secretaries of state, and some [lawmakers](#) within his own [party](#). There are legitimate questions that demand answers about the bloodshed that accompanied the withdrawal, and the Biden administration

must answer for these. But the deadly attack on the Kabul airport at the onset of the withdrawal and the heartbreaking scenes of Afghans desperately trying to escape against the backdrop of the Taliban waltzing back to power will be far more seriously scrutinized in the months ahead on Capitol Hill than the [much-needed reckoning](#) with the 20-year catastrophe of U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

It is not difficult to imagine a plausible alternative scenario in which Biden kept small teams of CIA and JSOC operators inside Afghanistan for years to come, as he [proposed](#) in 2009 when he was vice president and argued against the surge. The option to keep a few thousand troops was being pushed by military officials as well as some influential Democratic senators. That could have laid the groundwork for episodic surges of conventional forces, as [happened](#) after Obama withdrew from Iraq. Biden clearly did not want to face the prospect of taking ownership of an utterly failed 20-year-old war that was always going to end with the Taliban in power. While he deserves credit for staying the course on withdrawal, it was Trump who put that policy into motion.

Despite the withdrawal, the Biden administration has already shown that it will continue to use drones and covert strike teams to hit “targets” in nations where the U.S. lacks ground capabilities. These assassinations are now being officially rebranded as “over-the-horizon operations,” the chosen messaging for a long-standing policy of conducting drone strikes in countries with which the U.S. is not officially at war.





Relatives and neighbors of the Ahmadi family gathered around the incinerated husk of their car, which was targeted and hit by an American drone strike in Kabul, Afghanistan, on Aug. 30, 2021. Photo: Marcus Yam/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images

Killing Them Softly

When Biden was sworn into office, his administration said it was [undertaking](#) a comprehensive review of the targeted killing process and reviewing the changes made by Trump to determine its own policy. Biden did not authorize any known drone strikes during his first six months in office. In March, the New York Times [reported](#) that the administration had “quietly” imposed some limits on drone strikes, rolling back Trump’s delegation of authority to strike. The order was issued by national security adviser Jake Sullivan on the day of Biden’s inauguration. “The military and the C.I.A. must now obtain White House permission to attack terrorism suspects in poorly governed places where there are scant American ground troops, like Somalia and Yemen,” said the Times. Biden’s no-drone-strike streak was broken in late July when the military

conducted a strike in Somalia, claiming it was a defensive measure. That was [followed](#) by two more [strikes](#). Biden has also authorized drone [strikes](#) in Syria.

But it was an August 29 drone strike during the withdrawal from Afghanistan that provided the most harrowing flashback to the Obama era. The Pentagon claimed the target was a car driven by Islamic State members transporting explosives to be used in another attack on the Kabul airport. Two days after the strike, Biden held up the operation as proof of the concept that the U.S. would continue to hammer the nails of terrorism remotely. “We have what’s called over-the-horizon capabilities, which means we can strike terrorists and targets without American boots on the ground,” Biden [said](#). With flashes of Bush-like bravado, Biden boasted: “We’ve shown that capacity just in the last week. We struck ISIS-K remotely, days after they murdered 13 of our service-members and dozens of innocent Afghans. And to ISIS-K: We are not done with you yet.”

But the victims were not ISIS members. They were civilians.

The strike had actually wiped out a family, seven of them children. The driver of the car, Zemari Ahmadi, was a longtime employee of a U.S. aid organization. “Almost everything senior defense officials asserted in the hours, and then days, and then weeks after the Aug. 29 drone strike turned out to be false,” [reported](#) the New York Times, whose [investigation](#) exposed the stream of lies and misinformation offered by U.S. officials. Despite the fact that at least one child could clearly be seen in footage filmed as part of the eight-hour surveillance operation before the strike, a Pentagon internal inquiry [cleared](#) all U.S. personnel of any wrongdoing. The general in charge of the review said the operatives who carried out the

strike “had a genuine belief that there was an imminent threat to U.S. forces.”



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Making a Killing

The bipartisan self-exoneration machine for U.S. crimes abroad has long been a centerpiece of the imperial stance and complements the broad consensus in Washington, D.C., on a range of national security issues. Biden [pledged](#) early on in his administration that he was “ending all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen.” In reality, the U.S. has continued to support the Saudi scorched earth campaign by pretending it is defensive when it is clearly not and continues to allow U.S. naval operations in support of the catastrophic Saudi blockade. Saudi Arabia’s aim is to starve Yemen into a state of subjugation. While the supposed target is the pro-Iranian Houthi movement that seized power in Sanaa in 2015, the lethal suffering is being meted out against ordinary Yemenis of various political and tribal affiliations. In August, UNICEF [assessed](#) that the situation “is worsening on all levels, especially for children,” with five million Yemenis “one step away from succumbing to famine and the diseases that go with it, and 10 million more are right behind them.”

Far from treating Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and the Saudi regime as “pariahs,” as Biden promised on the campaign trail, his administration has continued to support the kingdom’s genocidal war in Yemen and to maintain an intimate military and

diplomatic relationship with Riyadh. This is not to say that there are no differences between Biden and Trump on the U.S. approach to Saudi Arabia. Trump broke with U.S. tradition and chose Riyadh as his first foreign destination as president. During the trip, Trump announced a “significant expansion” of U.S. support for the Saudis in the form of what he [claimed](#) was a 10-year, \$350 billion arms [deal](#) and participated in a bizarre gathering with King Salman and other despots [laying hands](#) on a glowing orb. By contrast, Biden has refused to meet with the crown prince, the de facto Saudi ruler, and, as The Intercept recently [reported](#), the Saudis have retaliated against what they consider to be Biden’s degradation of their status by intentionally driving up oil prices.

Despite U.S. intelligence concluding that the crown prince ordered Khashoggi’s execution in Turkey, Biden has [refused](#) to impose sanctions or deliver any meaningful U.S. response to the murder. “We have talked about this, in terms of our partnership with Saudi Arabia, as a recalibration. It’s not a rupture,” [said](#) State Department spokesperson Ned Price when asked about Biden’s retreat from his “make them in fact the pariah that they are” campaign pledge. “I would contextualize that by making the point that it is undeni-

Rather than cutting off the Saudis, the Biden policy is to “evaluate, on a case-by-case basis, proposed weapons sales and transfers based on two criteria: our interests and our values.”

able that Saudi Arabia is a hugely influential country in the Arab world and beyond.” Price made clear “we stand with Saudi Arabia in its efforts to defend itself,” including with U.S. weaponry and intelligence. Rather than cutting off the Saudis, Price said, the Biden policy is to “evaluate, on a case-by-case basis, proposed weapons sales and transfers based on two criteria: our interests and our values.” In September, the Biden administration [approved](#) a \$500 million allocation to support a range of Saudi attack helicopters and in early November sent Congress [notification](#) of its first proposed weapons [sale](#) to the kingdom: some \$650 million in missile systems. The State Department [claims](#) that the weapon deals will “support U.S. foreign policy and national security of the United States by helping to improve the security of a friendly country that continues to be an important force for political and economic progress in the Middle East.” Biden’s tough talk, it seems, was substantively a stream of opportunistic election-year hot air.

“We should never be selling human rights abusers weapons, but we certainly should not be doing so in the midst of a humanitarian crisis they are responsible for,” [said](#) Rep. Ilhan Omar, a Democrat from Minnesota. Omar has been [steadfast](#) in opposing the arms sales to Saudi Arabia, and on November 12 she introduced a [joint resolution](#) to block it. “Congress has the authority to stop these sales, and we must exercise that power.” Republican Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky, a tenacious opponent of U.S. support for Saudi Arabia, is [spearheading](#) a related [effort](#) with Bernie Sanders in the Senate to [ban](#) the sales.

Less than a year into its tenure, the Biden administration has [approved](#) a range of [weapons sales](#) to nearly two dozen countries, including a host of nations with atrocious human rights records.

Despite Biden's campaign pledge that there would be "no more blank checks" for the Egyptian dictator Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, a man Trump lovingly [referred](#) to as his "favorite dictator," the administration has already approved more than \$1 billion in security assistance to Egypt, withholding only a [symbolic portion](#) of the aid in response to widespread human rights abuses. Biden has moved forward with Trump's \$23 billion weapons deal for the United Arab Emirates, including armed drones and F-35 attack planes. "The highly touted Abraham Accords that supposedly broke a decades-long bottleneck in Arab-Israeli peacemaking have turned into an arms bonanza," [observed](#) Mohamad Bazzi, director of the Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at New York University. Biden, he charged, is "turning the normalization agreements between Israel and Arab countries into an arms race that could fuel new conflicts in the Middle East." In June, the White House [notified](#) Congress of its [intent](#) to sell some \$2.5 billion in fighter jets, missiles, and other weapons to the Philippines, which is ruled by the despotic leader Rodrigo Duterte who has [boasted](#), "I don't care about human rights."

"Other Options" on Iran

While it has almost entirely disappeared from the discourse, the U.S. still has some 2,500 [publicly acknowledged](#) troops on the ground in Iraq under the auspices of containing ISIS and supporting Iraqi forces. Biden has stated that by the end of 2021 these troops will no longer be part of a combat mission. Instead, they are being [reclassified](#) as advisers to Iraqi troops and serve as quick response forces to take action against remaining ISIS fighters. Most of those soldiers are projected to remain in Iraq indefinitely, as will

the 900 U.S. troops on the ground in northeast Syria. Linger over these ongoing troop deployments is the unresolved question of Biden's approach to Iran, which is geographically situated near a series of U.S. military disasters, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria. Tehran is also facing yet another Israeli administration that wants to escalate the conflict between the two countries and is publicly [lobbying](#) Biden to act more aggressively.

Throughout the 2020 campaign, Biden touted his role, as vice president, in securing the Iran nuclear deal and vowed to reverse Trump's abandonment of it. Two of Biden's top national security officials, Jake Sullivan and Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, spearheaded the Obama administration's Iran negotiations. But nearly a year into the new presidency, there has been little momentum. After four years of Trump's open hostilities, threats, expanded sanctions, and the assassination of Suleimani, Iran has erected even greater barriers to negotiations with the U.S. While the Iranian people continue to suffer from U.S. sanctions, Tehran has steadily engaged in a realignment, and the so-called hard-liners who opposed a deal with the West have been emboldened by the failures of the short-lived agreement with the Obama administration. For his part, Biden has not made resuming talks a major priority or shown a willingness to make concessions.





President Joe Biden meets with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett in the Oval Office at the White House in Washington, D.C., on Aug. 27, 2021. Photo: Sarahbeth Maney/Getty Images

Sitting alongside newly elected Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett at the White House in late August, Biden [said](#), “If diplomacy fails” with Iran, “we’re ready to turn to other options.” As an indication of how the U.S. embrace of drone warfare has spread globally, the Biden administration has [accused](#) Iran of [sponsoring](#) a series of drone strikes against a U.S. outpost in Syria in October. “With regards to the issue of how we’re going to respond to their actions against interest of the U.S., whether they are drone strikes or anything else, is we’re going to respond,” Biden said at a press conference at the end of the G20 summit in Rome. “We will continue to respond.” On November 10, the U.S. Navy’s Fifth Fleet [began](#) a series of joint military exercises with Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain in the Red Sea. The exercises were the first-ever confirmed among these nations and grew out of the Trump administration’s so-called Abraham Accords. “It is exciting to see US forces training with regional partners to enhance our collective maritime security capabilities,” [said](#) the commander of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command.

Alongside this rhetoric, the White House also appears to be intensi-

fying its behind-the-scenes efforts to target Iran economically. The Biden administration, according to a [report](#) from Reuters, has begun encouraging China to cut off Iranian oil imports, a move that could indicate the White House is contemplating a greater expansion of sanctions and other methods of economic warfare. During his first [speech](#) to the U.N. General Assembly in September, Iran's newly elected leader Ebrahim Raisi struck a pessimistic note about prospects for a substantive shift in policy from Trump to Biden. "The world doesn't care about 'America First' or 'America is Back,'" he said. Economic "sanctions are the U.S.'s new way of war with the nations of the world," he said. "Sanctions, especially sanctions on medicine at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, are crimes against humanity." He added, "We don't trust the promises made by the U.S. government."

Those sentiments seem to be underscored by a significant number of Iranians, according to an [October poll](#) by the University of Maryland. The poll [found](#) that a large majority of respondents did not believe the U.S. would abide by the nuclear deal if the U.S. reentered and that Iranians had only a marginally more favorable view of Biden than Trump. With [regular skirmishes](#) between [U.S. and Iranian ships](#) in international waters and U.S. [accusations](#) that Iran is facilitating drone strikes and [other attacks](#) on U.S. forces in Syria, there will be consistent pressure on Biden to escalate the situation. This scenario could also benefit hard-line factions in Iran who oppose reengagement with the U.S. and its allies. In early November, Iran's foreign ministry laid out its [conditions](#) for returning to the nuclear deal. Among its demands was the lifting of all economic sanctions imposed after Trump abandoned the agreement, that the U.S. admit its responsibility for destroying it, and that Biden pledge that the U.S. will not renege on its commitments again.



The Israeli Iron Dome missile defense system intercepts Hamas rockets in the sky above the Gaza Strip on May 16, 2021. Photo: Anas Baba/AFP via Getty Images

Force Projection

While there is much media focus these days on the intensely polarized dynamic on Capitol Hill between Democrats and Republicans, as well as domestic legislative battles among Democrats, none of this has stopped the work of the empire from moving forward. Legislation aimed at increasing funding for social programs, education, and other public goods is consistently held hostage by politicians harping over the costs. This has been the case with Biden's Build Back Better legislation, which has seen some conservative Democrats join their Republican colleagues in gutting social spending in the name of fiscal responsibility. The original BBB 10-year projection was **\$3.5 trillion** and has been steadily chiseled

down to half that size to appease critics. Juxtapose this with the bipartisan “defense” spending spree that has the U.S. on course to produce a Pentagon budget of more than \$7 trillion over the next decade, and the priorities of this government’s political class come into sharp focus.

The Biden administration’s [staunch defense](#) of Israel’s war of annihilation against the Palestinians and its [collective punishment](#) of the citizens of Gaza through a sustained bombing campaign last spring is now a footnote. Biden’s unwavering [support](#) for his “great, great friend” Benjamin Netanyahu during the Ramadan siege of Gaza, as well as his [embrace](#) of Trump’s shambolic “Abraham Accords,” indicates how little substantive distance there is between the previous administration and Biden on some core international priorities. From Trump to Biden, U.S. policy has been consistent, with large bipartisan majorities in Congress continuing the upward trajectory of U.S. military aid and weapons sales to Israel.

In September, after Biden asked for the increased funding to “[replenish](#)” the rockets used by Israel during its siege of Gaza earlier in the year, the House authorized a whopping \$1 billion for Israel’s Iron Dome system in a “[blowout](#)” 420-9 vote. “Thank you to the members of the U.S. House of Representatives, Democrats and Republicans alike, for the sweeping support for Israel and commitment to its security,” [said](#) Bennett, the Israeli prime minister, taking a swipe at the tiny group of eight Democrats and one Republican who voted against it. “Those who try to challenge this support received a timeless answer.” That money is in addition to the \$500 million the U.S. gives to Israel for missile defense every year as part of a nearly \$4 billion annual package. “The funding being appropriated today simply continues and strengthens this sup-

port,” **said** Pelosi. “Passage of this bill reflects the great unity, in Congress on a bipartisan and bicameral basis, for Israel. Security assistance to Israel is vital, because Israel security is an imperative for America’s security.”

The same month, a large bipartisan majority in the House of Representatives **passed** a massive \$768 billion defense spending bill, allocating some \$25 billion more than the Biden administration requested. Efforts by some progressive Democrats to thwart the unrequested increase were defeated when **more** than a dozen Democrats joined the Republicans to block their amendments. “We have produced a product that everybody in this House can be proud of,” said Democratic Rep. Adam Smith, chair of the Armed Services Committee. The ranking Republican on that committee, Republican Mike Rogers, **told** Politico that the bill is “laser-focused on preparing our military to prevail in a conflict with China.”



Soldiers hold machine guns and grenade launchers in position as part of a military exercise simulating the defense against the intrusion of Chinese military, amid rising tensions between Taipei and Beijing, in Tainan, Taiwan, on Nov. 11, 2021. Photo: Ceng Shou Yi/NurPhoto via Getty Images

Perhaps the most enduring foreign policy moves to come in the Biden administration will center around the U.S. posture toward Beijing. Successive U.S. administrations have gradually [shifted](#) toward a more adversarial China stance. At the same time, China has steadily spread its sphere of “soft power” influence globally and, along with Russia, has reasserted itself as an alternative to the U.S. as a prime business and diplomatic partner. On Capitol Hill, a sort of bloodlust has been brewing over China, with Democratic and Republican lawmakers pushing for more [aggressive](#) U.S. policy, [particularly](#) to [confront](#) China’s actions in self-governed Taiwan. Under the Trump administration, the U.S. was moving toward a [strategy](#) that would “enable Taiwan to develop an effective asymmetric de-

fense strategy and capabilities that will help ensure its security, freedom from coercion, resilience and ability to engage China on its own terms,” according to a declassified strategy [document](#) that also called for an enhanced “combat-credible U.S. military presence and posture in the Indo-Pacific region to uphold U.S. interests and security commitments.” The objective is “to defeat Chinese actions across the spectrum of conflict.”

At a CNN [town hall](#) on October 22, Biden was asked whether the U.S. could keep up with China militarily and whether it would defend Taiwan. “Yes and yes,” Biden replied. “Militarily, China, Russia, and the rest of the world knows we have the most powerful military in the history of the world. Don’t worry about whether we’re going to – they’re going to be more powerful. What you do have to worry about is whether or not they’re going to engage in activities that will put them in a position where there – they may make a serious mistake.” Asked directly if the U.S. would come to Taiwan’s aid if China “attacked” it, Biden said, “Yes, we have a commitment to do that.” At least one Democratic lawmaker has floated the idea of preemptively giving Biden war powers against China in the form of a “very narrow and specific contingent authorization for the use of military force” to “prevent China from invading Taiwan, or deter them.” Rep. Elaine Luria, the vice chair of the House Armed Services Committee and a retired Navy officer, [told](#) Politico the aim would be to remove “strategic ambiguity” and the need to wait for congressional debate.

Secretary of State Anthony Blinken has staked out a hard-line position on Taiwan, [calling](#) for a return to Taiwan’s independent participation at the U.N., which has not happened since 1971. Beijing’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson strongly rebuked this move, [say-](#)

ing Blinken's statement "seriously violates the one-China principle and the stipulations of the three China-US joint communiqués, violates the promise it has made, violates the basic norms governing international relations, and has sent a seriously wrong signals to the 'Taiwan independence' forces."

Under Bush, Obama, and Trump, the U.S. has increased arms sales to Taiwan, and the island's president recently confirmed in an interview with CNN the presence there of U.S. soldiers. It was the first official confirmation of the U.S. military deployment by a Taiwanese president in decades. It has been an open secret for some time that U.S. special operations forces are operating in Taiwan, and the Pentagon actually posted a since-deleted video in 2020 showing its special forces engaged in a joint training exercise, called "Balance Tamper," with Taiwanese troops. In August, the Biden administration proposed its first \$750 million arms sale to Taiwan following Trump's approval of more than \$20 billion dollars in sales of a range of tanks, MQ-9 Reaper drones, and other sophisticated attack aircraft, as well as cruise missiles. The Obama administration approved roughly \$14 billion worth of sales. Beijing, which has intensified its military maneuvers around Taiwan, has expressed outrage at the acceleration of the weapons sales. Chinese President Xi Jinping recently warned that "the Asia-Pacific region cannot and should not relapse into the confrontation and division of the cold war era."

During a virtual summit between Biden and Xi on November 15, both leaders acknowledged the potential for grave dangers posed by an acrimonious relationship, and the White House sought to portray the meeting as Biden's effort to mold a competition-without-conflict doctrine on China. Still, Xi warned Biden that the

U.S. was “playing with fire” with its stance on Taiwan and cautioned against building divisions and alliances that would “inevitably bring disaster to the world.”

While U.S. rhetoric about China has grown incrementally belligerent over the past decade, it is important to note that the U.S. spends more on defense than China, Russia, India, the U.K., Germany,

The fact remains that the U.S. is the largest arms dealer in the world.

France, Japan, South Korea, and Australia [combined](#). U.S. politicians go to great lengths to emphasize the menacing nature of Russia and China on the international stage, but the fact remains that the U.S. is the largest arms dealer in the world. A recent [report](#) from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, which has documented international weapons sales and trafficking since 1950, found that since 2011, the U.S. has significantly increased its share of global arms sales, as have NATO members Germany and France. During the same period, Russian and Chinese weapons exports have decreased.

China is a robust military power within its sphere of influence and geographic control, but its ability to impose its will globally by force is anemic compared to the U.S., particularly when combined with the broader capabilities and spending power of the NATO alliance. “[T]he view that China is the United States’ chief competitor and even adversary has become widespread and ingrained, and the similarities in the two administrations’ approaches far outweigh any differences,” [noted](#) Richard Haass, president of the Council on

Foreign Relations. “U.S. policy toward China has hardly changed since Biden became president.”



President Joe Biden and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, right, talk at a 9/11 memorial after a summit at NATO headquarters in Brussels on June 14, 2021. Photo: Brendan Smialowski/AFP via Getty Images

The Prodigal Superpower

On Biden’s first trip to Europe as president, to attend the June G7 summit and then meetings with NATO, he was welcomed as a hero. Trump had consistently ridiculed NATO and many European countries and repeatedly violated diplomatic norms, threatening to pull the U.S. out of the alliance and characterizing it as an unnecessary and irrelevant waste of U.S. resources. Such talk, contrasted with Trump’s warm rhetoric about Russian leader Vladimir Putin, was a

cause of constant concern among NATO nations. “Trump’s threats to withdraw had sent officials scrambling to prevent the annual gathering of NATO leaders in Brussels last July from turning into a disaster,” [reported](#) the New York Times in 2019. The Times added that a NATO summit in Washington, D.C., to mark the alliance’s 70th anniversary was “downgraded to a foreign ministers gathering, as some diplomats feared that Mr. Trump could use a Washington summit meeting to renew his attacks on the alliance.” Foreign Policy [described](#) Biden’s reception at the NATO gathering last June: “A long-lost friend returned to the global stage, just as he promised his country would do. And who could ignore the expressions of relief – even joy – on the faces of global leaders. It was the return of the prodigal superpower.”

At the NATO meetings, Biden and other leaders emphasized expanding the scope of what they consider to be the alliance’s role in protecting Western interests with a focus on the growing influence not only of Russia, but also of China, a nation far from the north Atlantic. “NATO is critically important for U.S. interests in and of itself. If there weren’t one, we’d have to invent one,” Biden [said](#). “It allows America to conduct its business around the world in a way that never would have occurred were it not for NATO.” Jens Stoltenberg, NATO’s secretary general, celebrated the return of Biden and spoke of the need to confront Beijing. “China is rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal with more warheads and a larger number of sophisticated delivery systems,” he [said](#). “It is opaque in implementing its military modernization. It is cooperating militarily with Russia, including through exercises in the Euro-Atlantic area.”

Biden welcomed the launch of the “NATO 2030 agenda,” which lays

the groundwork for an increasingly confrontational disposition toward both Russia and China. “The last time NATO put together a strategic plan was back in 2010, when Russia was considered a partner and China wasn’t even mentioned,” Biden [observed](#). That era, he noted, was over. “We talked about the long-term systemic challenges that China’s activities pose to our collective security today.” A NATO [fact sheet](#) on the 2030 agenda states: “The rules-based international order, which underpins the security, freedom and prosperity of Allies, is under pressure from authoritarian countries, like Russia and China, that do not share our values. This has implications for our security, values, and democratic way of life.”

U.S. policy has, for years, steadily pushed China and Russia into even tighter partnership. The escalation of rhetoric from NATO, particularly about China, is likely to further embolden leaders in both Beijing and Moscow. This dynamic in turn strengthens the position of neo-Cold Warriors in Congress and the U.S. national security bureaucracy who have agitated for a more hostile U.S. and NATO posture.

Biden has long been a staunch supporter of NATO expansion and was instrumental in several NATO military actions in the 1990s, including the 1999 bombing of Serbia and Montenegro. In that case, Biden was a chief architect of President Bill Clinton’s 78-day bombing campaign, which was waged in defiance of congressional opposition. But after the 9/11 attacks, Biden praised the Bush administration for its overtures to Putin. In remarks delivered at a Foreign Relations Committee hearing in 2002, Biden emphasized the centrality of NATO expansion to U.S. interests and expressed optimism that the U.S. could work with Putin. “I’m pleased that President Bush is carrying on an important work begun by the last adminis-

tration of bringing new members into NATO and reaching out to Russia. 9/11 has created historic opportunities to continue to process a reconciliation with Russia,” Biden [said](#), describing Putin as a Western-friendly Russian leader of a type “not seen since Peter the Great.”

Biden’s rosy assessment of Putin would soon fade away as the mirage of post-9/11 camaraderie disappeared, and Biden and Putin found themselves at sharp odds over NATO expansion. NATO’s aggressive push eastward since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union has been a constant point of concern and anger in Russia, and Putin in particular has made challenging that expansion a priority. Biden [claims](#) that as vice president in 2011 he told Putin directly, “I’m looking into your eyes, and I don’t think you have a soul.” Putin, he said, “looked back at me, and he smiled, and he said, ‘We understand one another.’”

The elite foreign policy consensus on Putin often reduces Moscow’s actions to cartoonish villainy.

The elite foreign policy consensus on Putin often reduces Moscow’s actions to cartoonish villainy. This perspective, which was also shared by a powerful faction of Russia hawks within the Trump administration, encourages a view that the U.S. — with its

foreign military bases and multiple simultaneous wars — has the moral standing and credibility to judge and police Russia’s actions. Russia is, without question, a violent actor that has repeatedly shown little hesitation to use force both internally and externally.

But refusing to consider the security and sovereignty concerns that fuel some of Moscow's actions bolsters an ahistorical narrative.

During the Obama presidency, the deteriorating relations culminated in an incendiary situation when a pro-Western government seized power in Ukraine in 2014, following sustained anti-government protests backed by the U.S. and European Union nations. The Russian government accused the U.S. and NATO of fomenting an “anti-constitutional armed coup” that brought down the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich. A civil war erupted. On one side were supporters of the new government, including not just military and police forces but also neo-Nazi paramilitaries; on the other were pro-Russian militia backed by Moscow. In response, Putin deployed Russian troops to annex the Crimean Peninsula, which the U.S., NATO, and Ukraine all maintain is Ukrainian territory. At the time, Biden was the Obama administration's point man on Ukraine and an aggressive proponent of moving Ukraine toward NATO membership.

In 2015, Noam Chomsky – who would go on to win the praise of mainstream liberals for his criticisms of Trump and support for Biden – argued that it was a mistake to ignore Russia's overarching concerns about the U.S. and NATO roles in Ukraine. “Whatever you think about Putin – think he's the worst monster since Hitler – they still have a case, and it's a case that no Russian leader is going to back down from,” Chomsky [said](#) on “Democracy Now!” in 2015, noting that the new Ukrainian government passed a resolution to move forward with NATO membership. “Russia is surrounded by U.S. offensive weapons – sometimes they're called ‘defense,’ but they're all offensive weapons. ... No Russian leader, no matter who it is, could tolerate Ukraine, right at the geostrategic

center of Russian concerns, joining a hostile military alliance.”

Since then, Moscow has periodically deployed forces in large numbers to border areas of Ukraine, sparking saber-rattling from the U.S. This dynamic has made the former Soviet republic an increasingly important front line in NATO’s fight to push east and Putin’s campaign to reverse it. The U.S. has steadily ramped up its support, both overt and covert, for anti-Russian forces in Ukraine. The Kremlin has simultaneously supported armed, pro-Russian separatist militias, particularly in the east of the country, where thousands have died in a bloody civil war raging over the past seven years. Since 2015, the U.S. has had troops in western Ukraine on what is officially a training mission, and, under Biden, the U.S. and NATO have increased naval activities in the Black Sea region. Moscow has accused the administration of seeking to provoke Russia through such “aggressive U.S. military action.” In October, after NATO expelled eight Russian diplomats from Brussels and accused them of being undeclared intelligence agents, the Kremlin [announced](#) it was ending its diplomatic engagement with NATO and shutting down the alliance’s diplomatic mission in Moscow.

Ukraine is set to receive nearly half a billion dollars in security assistance, with Biden continuing the Trump administration’s transfer of lethal weapons and military training. In November, Ukraine’s embassy in Washington, D.C., posted a [tweet](#), boasting that it had “received the delivery of approx 80,000 kilos of ammunition from” the U.S., stating that it was part of the increased “security assistance directed by President Biden” as “a demonstration of commitment to the success of a stable, democratic, & free” Ukraine. The November 14 tweet contained images of what appeared to be the of-

flooding of munitions at an airstrip. The situation has steadily deteriorated during the first year of Biden's presidency and, with Moscow and the U.S. and NATO all intensifying their activities around Ukraine, some analysts of the region have warned that the developments could once again lead to overt conflict. "There are very, very dark clouds on the horizon," Michael Kofman, director of the Russia studies program at the Center for Naval Analyses, [told](#) U.S. military publication Stars and Stripes. Russia, he said, has "full control over how they deliver gas supplies to Europe," adding, "Winter is perfect time for a military operation."

Biden has maintained the Trump administration's opposition to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline under the Baltic to Germany, which could double Russian gas exports to Europe and cut off a source of income to Ukraine. In mid-November, German energy regulators, citing laws governing the operation of subsidiaries, "[temporarily suspended](#)" certification of the project amid pressure from Washington, some EU states, and Ukraine. Kyiv has accused Russia of blackmailing Europe by inflating gas prices and argued that if Moscow is allowed to circumvent Ukraine, it would embolden Putin to consider a full invasion.

As vice president, Biden was a central player in bolstering Ukraine's military and intelligence capabilities while simultaneously working to impose and expand sanctions on Russia over its Ukraine policies. (That role came under intense scrutiny as the scandals that led to Trump's first impeachment unfolded.) "The United States does not and will never recognize Russia's purported annexation of the [Crimean] peninsula, and we will stand with Ukraine against Russia's aggressive acts," Biden [said](#) a month into his presidency. "We will continue to work to hold Russia accountable for its abuses

and aggression in Ukraine.”

Despite Trump’s subservient rhetoric toward Putin, on a policy level there is more continuity than difference between the two administrations. The Trump administration was an aggressive [opponent](#) of many of Russia’s international actions, expelling Russian diplomats and imposing an array of sanctions against government officials and private citizens. Russia hawks within the Trump administration fought to increase funding to the European Defense Initiative by more than 40 percent from Obama-era levels and opened the official flow of lethal aid to Ukraine, a move Obama had [publicly resisted](#). [Daniel Vajdich](#), a senior fellow at the pro-NATO Atlantic Council, [argued](#), “When you actually look at the substance of what [the Trump] administration has done, not the rhetoric but the substance, this administration has been much tougher on Russia than any in the post-Cold War era.”

Those sentiments were echoed by Richard Haass, the Council on Foreign Relations president. “[W]hatever Trump’s personal regard for Putin, the Trump administration’s posture toward Russia was in fact fairly tough. It introduced new sanctions, closed Russian consulates in the United States, and enhanced and expanded U.S. military support to Ukraine – all of which has continued under Biden,” Haass [wrote](#) in a blunt assessment of the foreign and national security policies of the Biden administration. Haass asserted that “there is far more continuity between the foreign policy of the current president and that of the former president than is typically recognized.”





President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania Trump watch a Navy Blue Angels and Air Force Thunderbirds fly over at Trump's "Salute to America" event on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, D.C., on July 4, 2020. Photo: Saul Loeb/AFP via Getty Images

Imperial Charade

The Trump era was, for many people, terrifying. And for understandable reasons. Yet it is important to strip away the veneer of Trump's insanity and audacity, without minimizing the actual dangers he posed, so that we can analyze his administration's policies and [set them in a proper historical context](#). Doing so makes clear that U.S. commitments to militarism and permanent global war are enduring and bipartisan – even when large swaths of the electorate and the political class despise a president and view him as corrupt, incompetent, and dangerous.

What does it say about a country that manages to stay the imperial course through such a diverse succession of leaders as George W. Bush (and Dick Cheney), Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe

Biden?

A nation that was willing to confront its bipartisan addiction to wars, militarism, and the national security state would have viewed Trump as an extroverted and blunt representation of the worst aspects of the U.S. role in the world. His time in office should have spurred deep reflection and a desire to change course. Instead, mainstream discourse has devolved into a stream of ahistorical drivel that treats Trump as a grand anomaly and pretends that the pre-Trump course was somehow just, moral, or smart.

Biden has spent a half-century in public office in what has effectively been a career-spanning run for the presidency. In the end, his long-sought victory in 2020 was the product of the stubborn inevitability that has marked his political life and that of

The Biden presidency is a caretaker government, and its constituency is the War Party.

America's enduring militarist juggernaut. It is fitting that Biden's rise to the nation's highest office [follows the historic election of a former reality television star](#). Biden's ascent embodies the essence of a decaying empire struggling to maintain its dominance by steering the ship of state back to familiar waters. But the Biden presidency is, perhaps more than any in recent history, a caretaker government, and on issues of counterterrorism, militarism, and national security, its constituency is the War Party. The bedrock principles of this bipartisan coalition revolve around a nonnegotiable set of understandings:

- The U.S. has the sovereign right to unilaterally impose its will on the world.
- The U.S. makes the rules of the international order but is not bound by them.
- The U.S. will use the iron fist of militarism to defend neoliberal economic policies and the usurping of natural resources.
- No national or international body is fit to stand in judgment of its actions or conduct.

Trump also upheld these principles, but his style was far too garish, and the man was too unpredictable to be tolerated for another four years. Bernie Sanders, whose political positions would make him a run-of-the-mill social democrat in many European countries, was viewed by foreign policy elites as a Bolshevik. In the end, Biden was the only viable candidate who could be trusted to reset the international order, and voters delivered – for their own separate, sincere, and diverse reasons. For many voters, Biden was not the ideal or preferred candidate, they just [wanted](#) Trump gone.

Biden's election slogan was "America is back." The truth is that "America" never left. There will be no major departures from the imperial course under Biden. While the drone wars [continue](#), and the shift back to Cold War posturing in Europe and Asia accelerates, Biden will maintain the hostile stance toward left movements and governments throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. On climate change, Biden will reverse some of Trump's most extreme stances, while still placing the profits of major corporations and the military industry over the health of the planet. The militarization of the borders and the maltreatment of refugees will remain, and the vast domestic surveillance apparatus will endure. The stark truth is this: The interests of the War Party trump any political dis-

putes between the Democrats and the Republicans.

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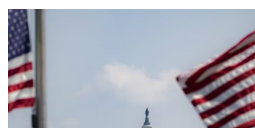
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